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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006683

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: TODAY'S ACTION AWAY FROM THE STREETS

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Embattled Chief Election Commissioner Aziz may be contemplating a long leave of absence, which could remove one opposition flash point, but the Awami League now demands that Chief Adviser Ahmed also go before lifting its nationwide blockade. Rumors that Chief Adviser Ahmed suffered a medical emergency this morning proved to be false but reflect widespread apprehension about his fragile health. The streets of Dhaka are relatively calm. End Summary.

On the Ground

¶2. (SBU) As of 1730 local, there are no reports of significant violence in Bangladesh during the first day of the opposition's renewed nationwide transportation blockade. There are scattered reports of attacks on buses and private vehicles, but traffic in some parts of Dhaka appeared close to normal, with more businesses open and less tension than at the outset of last week's blockade. In downtown Awami League strongholds, however, virtually all shops were closed and traffic was light.

¶3. (SBU) Demonstrators were peacefully clustered in two dozen areas. Early in the morning, police persuaded activists of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat Islami to vacate an area where Awami League workers would shortly be gathering to enforce the shutdown of major transportation arteries in order to avoid confrontation.

Talks Continue

¶4. (C) According to contacts in the Awami League and President Ahmed's office, last night's meeting between Chief Adviser Ahmed and party president Sheikh Hasina produced no breakthroughs, with the opposition chieftain reiterating her insistence that Ahmed meet all of her demands before she lifts the blockade. Ahmed apparently claimed he had implemented 80 percent of Hasina's demands, and that the others are long-term in nature.

¶5. (C) Earlier today, however, three caretaker government advisers called on Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz. While they declined substantive comment to the press afterwards, saying they had to report back to Ahmed later today, an election commission official told us Aziz briefed his senior staff that he had not been asked to resign but to consider a long leave of absence. Aziz reportedly indicated interest in the idea, saying he would check the law to see if leave were possible.

16. (C) Addressing party workers today, Awami League leader Motia Chowdhury warned the caretaker government against announcing an election schedule, as urged by Bangladesh Nationalist Party president Khaleda Zia, before opposition demands were fully met. She added another precondition for lifting the blockade -- the departure of Ahmed as chief adviser. While Awami League leaders had alluded to Ahmed's replacement as desirable, this was the first time it was explicitly stated as party policy. Other party leaders subsequently confirmed to us that Chowdhury spoke accurately on behalf of the party.

Health Alarm

17. (C) In the late morning, rumors circulated that medical personnel had rushed to the presidency after Ahmed suffered a medical emergency during a meeting with advisers. A senior official in Ahmed's office confirmed an event which appeared to be serious, but it later developed that Ahmed had momentarily felt unwell and an early afternoon meeting with advisers was rescheduled for 1830 today.

Embassy Operations

18. (SBU) The great majority of locally engaged staff came to work, although many reported disruptions and extra cost involved with their commute. Until further notice, Embassy personnel are confined to the diplomatic enclave. The emergency action committee met to review latest developments (septel).

Comment

DHAKA 00006683 002 OF 002

19. (C) The resumption of the blockade has not stopped a flurry of initiatives for breaking the impasse. Public posturing aside, the continuing restraint by both parties on the streets suggests a compromise may yet be reachable. A long leave of absence for the chief election commissioner might be a face-saving solution for Aziz as well as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party since it insists that any action be consistent with the constitution and "leave" would be a voluntary, not an imposed, departure.
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